

DRAFT

Some Events Leading Up To The First Appalachian Studies Conference

On March 15, 2020. I was scheduled to do a presentation at the Appalachian Studies Conferenced at the University of Kentucky. My presentation was to be about the first Appalachian Studies Conference which was held at Clinch Valley College on October 24 and 25, 1970—fifty years ago this year.

Unfortunately, the conference was called off due to the COVID-19 virus pandemic. I am writing this article to cover the gist of what I was going to say and to explain some aspects in detail.

When I became the director of Project Torchlight at Berea College during the summer of 1966, I was faced with many challenges and many opportunities. The funding for this new program was from President Johnson's War On Poverty through the Office Of Economic Opportunity Community Action programs. The Berea College program was funded through the Kentucky River Foothills agency which served the counties of Madison, Clark, Estill, and Powell.

Students chosen for the program were from low income families with fifty coming from each county. There were twenty-five males and females from each with about half black and half white from Clark and Madison Counties.

In addition to being low income, most were high risk in that many had already dropped out of school while others were

doing poorly and waiting to be old enough to do so. There was no shortage of eligible students.

For several days all staff members went out into the counties to recruit students but we soon realized that we had a tough row to hoe in doing so.

To their credit, social service agencies were usually helpful provided we kept a low profile. They didn't wish to rock the boat and understood well the political situations in their counties.

School personnel were, as a rule, afraid to assist and I found myself to be the brunt of disdain and ridicule. Starting at the top with a day of my own recruiting, I visited the Estill County school principal in his office. After telling him the purpose of my visit he stood up from his chair and said this to me: "Mr. Best, you are dealing in trash and I will have nothing to do with anyone who deals in trash."

This was his all-encompassing euphemism for those I was recruiting for the program and was uttered while he was pushing me out of the front door of his office. The other staff fared little better in their counties and they and I then took to the hollows, rural roads and creeks to find students. We found all 200 that we needed in ten days.

Having been from what Mr. Patrick referred to as the "trash" category myself, I quickly decided that the students needed to

hear from speakers who were from similar backgrounds to theirs and who could speak affirmatively to their experiences.

Each week we had a speaker who had been raised in circumstances similar to theirs. Included were preachers, artists, former moonshiners, craftsmen, small farmers, and others who were held in high regard in rural communities.

Two speakers were particularly enjoyed by the students and staff alike: One was McCoy Franklin who came to Berea College at age 21 unable to read and write. However, gifted with a photographic memory, he had memorized the Bible from cover to cover. Berea had an ungraded program at that time and McCoy went from first grade through high school, college, and seminary in nine years.

As a minister he became known for his sermons which never included any scripture readings, only quoting from memory. He was also known for his bird calls that he had perfected on the family farm while he was growing up. On many Sundays when I was in graduate school at the University of Tennessee (1959-1960) I went to a nearby town to hear him preach.

The other was Ray Harm, a West Virginia native living in Berea at the time, who would later become one of the most famous wildlife artists in American history, perhaps second only to Audubon. Both Franklin and Harm captivated students and staff alike with their knowledge of the natural world and their willingness to share that knowledge freely.

I quickly realized that a hands-on approach to learning was what it would take to motivate and inspire the students. All the students took a course in agriculture and one in home economics. They took a course in industrial arts and a course in art. And all were involved with differing music programs culminating with a full-length production of the Broadway musical, Oklahoma, under the leadership of Dr. Rolf Hovey, conductor of Berea's Chapel Choir. Also, under his leadership, they gave a choral performance of many styles of music at Union Church, adjacent to the Berea College campus.

Since many were behind with their reading skills, individual tutoring was given with grade levels sometime improving an academic year per week. I had never seen so many motivated young people who had two things in common: All seemed to be artistic and all were low income, neither of which were valued traits in the public schools of Kentucky at that time.

Each student was counseled and tutored by Berea College students from similar economic and cultural backgrounds, and the college student counselors were also their teachers in many extracurricular activities. Many music groups sprang up among the students, and all were a part of an off-campus trip one day each week to a place or event in Kentucky of historical or cultural significance including the Stephen Foster Story at Bardstown.

What all of the activity boiled down to was an intensive sixteen-hour daily eight weeks course in Appalachian Studies, but we

didn't call it that. The students were taken seriously and each was accepted unconditionally, regardless of background.

Despite our successes, or perhaps because of them, we were unpopular with some vested interests in some areas. The Clay City Times published a scathing editorial about Project Torchlight, calling it "Project Torchblight" and featured a cartoon of me sitting in a sports car with a New Jersey license plate prominently displayed. The editorial didn't go over well in Powell County and led to a boycott of many businesses advertised in the paper.

At the same time, we had a long article in the Louisville Courier Journal and a shorter article in the Christian Science Monitor praising the program and putting us on the map nationally.

Students came back to the campus once each month during the academic year and we again applied for another program during the summer of 1967.

We were again funded for a smaller group of 125 from the same four counties, but we also applied for an Upward Bound program from the Department of Health, Education, and Welfare. That grant was for fifty students from the Kentucky counties of Rockcastle, Pulaski, Clinton, Wayne, and McCreary.

While the two groups had different classes, all off campus activities, including trips, were taken together. Both groups excelled in the arts and students and staff worked together to create their own musical that they called "Blue Ribbon". This

musical was original with them including music, dance, and script.

By 1968 the Office of Economic Opportunity had fallen out of favor with politicians and Project Torchlight was not funded. OEO was in a downward spiral, never to recover completely. However, some programs were farmed out to other agencies within the federal government.

In 1968 we continued with Upward bound and our academic program revolved around two interdisciplinary courses— Human Development and Appalachian Studies. (I believe that was the first time an educational program had a course called Appalachian Studies.) We also continued to have a lot of focus on the arts.

In August after the summer session of Upward Bound was over, I was invited by Ike Vanderpool of the Council of Southern Mountains to speak at a training session of the Appalachian Volunteers to discuss the curriculum we had used in Projects Torchlight and Upward Bound. The session was being held at Union College in Barbourville, Kentucky.

Little did I realize that I was stepping into a hornet's nest. Within a few minutes of the start of my presentation some in the audience started shouting at me, accusing me of being "the enemy" and demanding that I sit down. Since no one in the audience defended my right to speak, I sat down.

Then Milton Ogle, a CSM staff member who was in charge of the session, stood on the stage and apologized for me, saying that I didn't understand what I was saying. Since Milton had been a staunch supporter of the presidential campaign of Barry Goldwater in 1964, I was a little surprised that he had done such a 180 degree political pivot.

The session with the AVs wasn't the only problem to come my way either. As soon as school started that September, I was accused of sedition by two principals in the Pulaski County School system. The schools were among six schools in the system at that time, all with students in Berea's Upward Bound program. One principal, who was also a minister, was from Eubank and the other from Shopville.

My crime was that we had both white and black students in the same program and I had paid visits to the families of students of both races. When I went to the school superintendent's office to find out what was going on, he laughed and said that I had nothing to fear since the two principals were "just being themselves".

For me, the encounters foreshadowed what was to be a life-long endurance of being attacked by partisans of both left and right. But it made me feel good that both camps were paying attention, and it was also good to be considered dangerous to the status quo.

Shortly after being threatened with sedition charges being leveled against me, I was surprised by some good fortune that

came my way. The very small Bahai community in Berea had invited a visitor from Indiana to come be their speaker. His name was Dr. Daniel Jordan, who was also the Upward Bound director at Indiana State University. Since I was the Upward Bound director at Berea, they invited me to have a private meeting with him.

Dr. Jordan and I compared notes about our two Upward Bound programs, and he was quite interested in our focus on Appalachian Studies as a way of motivating students. He then asked me where I planned to work on my doctorate.

I replied that I would like to do it in Appalachian Studies but had found no university in Kentucky, Tennessee, or North Carolina that was interested in having me work on an interdisciplinary doctorate. He then made a statement that was to change my life for the better.

He explained that he would soon be moving to the University of Massachusetts to be on the faculty of their new School of Education. He explained that part of their focus would be on ethnic studies and that I would be a perfect fit. That was music to my ears.

The next week I made an appointment to talk with Dr. Willis Weatherford, then president of Berea College, to request permission to get a sabbatical leave to work on a doctorate in Appalachian Studies.

I could tell he was pleased with my request, and said that he was hoping to establish an Appalachian Center at Berea. But he was also in a quandary. As an administrator, I didn't qualify for a sabbatical. However, he said he would take up my request with the Administrative Committee. They approved my request and I was given a sabbatical for a year at half pay.

I maintained contact with Dr. Jordan as he started his new position at UMASS/Amherst and prepared to leave Berea for my academic year residency at UMASS. I worked with my Upward Bound staff to prepare them for my time away from campus, and Upward Bound counselor, Mary McLaughlin, was chosen by President Weatherford to take my place during my absence. Several college students also worked for Upward Bound as their labor assignments, one in each county, and they were also prepared for my absence.

My wife, Irmgard, who was nearing completion of her interdisciplinary degree in Appalachian Studies, continued sharing with me valuable information gained from her research in the Berea College library. Much of her work consisted of independent studies with faculty from the psychology, sociology, and music departments, and she was in her element working by herself. I went with her to the Cherokee Indian Reservation to do some interviews with an elderly Cherokee man, Waddy Chiltosky for an independent study she was doing on Cherokee music.

Our three children, David who would be six during my absence, Barbara who would be four, and Michael who would be two were ready for me to be gone as well. My youngest brother, John, whose senior year at Berea would be that year, agreed to live in the apartment with Irmgard and our children. The faculty apartment was in Pearsons Dormitory, the third of three different men's dormitories we lived in during our first eleven years at Berea.

In late August of 1969, I then drove to Amherst in our Peugeot station wagon. I planned on coming home once a month to catch up on what was going on with Irmgard, David, Michael, and Barbara. Irmgard continued working toward her degree in Appalachian Studies, being the first student to be approved for such a degree at Berea.

The School of Education at UMASS was still in the second year of re-organization at the time of my arrival, and I chose to become a part of the Aesthetics Center. Most of the other students in the Center were visual artists, musicians, and dancers so I felt very much at home. Some of the tenured faculty were not happy with the changes mandated by the state legislature of Massachusetts and some of them were busy suing the dean. But other than that, things were going smoothly.

In addition to taking courses in philosophy, aesthetics, and anthropology, I also started taking independent studies for my concentration in Appalachian Studies. Dr. Jordan was my advisor.

After about three weeks had gone by, he invited me into his office for a conversation. His first question was: "Would you like to have an assistantship?"

Those words were music to my ears since I was a thousand miles away from home, on half salary, and trying to go home one weekend per month. I then asked him what I would be doing for the assistantship. He said: "Developing Appalachian Studies." He then added: "We will help."

The help involved giving me a desk in his office, a new IBM Selectric typewriter (the first I had ever seen), and an allowance to be used for postage and phone calls. (To this day, I don't know where the money for my assistantship came from, but I suspect that some foundation money was involved.)

Shortly thereafter I was in for another pleasant surprise. I was contacted by the U.S. Office of Education to see if I would be willing to do weekend site visits to Upward Bound programs at various colleges and universities in New England states and New York. I would be given a good stipend and mileage. I appreciated the offer, said yes, and worried a lot less about my financial situation by not having to borrow money for that year.

I spent most of my time on campus in the Education building and only went to my small room in North Amherst to sleep, usually after dark. The room was rented to me by an artist who spent most of her time painting and I was the only tenant in a small house.

The second floor room was so small that the only place where I could stand straight was in the center. However, it was quite warm and the bed was comfortable. I felt that I understood Robert Frost and Emily Dickenson a little better after that.

All the graduate students, faculty, and administrators met often in general meetings to take up issues involving education at that time. One early weekend we even went on a boat to Martha's Vineyard for a weekend retreat to get to know one another better. But being far from the places where I had lived in the Southern Appalachians, I also began to understand my own background a little better. And being around scholars from many ethnic groups made me quite conscious of my own cultural experiences.

The political situation in the United States at that time also contributed a lot to the overall state of flux. At times I had to listen to the radio to see if the university was going to have regular classes that day or if "free universities" might be springing up on campus under pop-up tents. Clearly, as Bob Dylan had told us in the early sixties, "the times they are a-changin'".

But things in the School Of Education were change oriented enough to keep graduate students from having to go to other parts of the campus and take advantage of the "free universities". We were part of a quieter, but even more profound, revolution—a revolution that held that all students, regardless of cultural or economic background, should be given

a chance for an excellent education. I felt very lucky to be a part of that revolution.

I did several site visits in New York, New Hampshire, Connecticut, and Rhode Island. To my surprise, most of the Upward Bound programs I visited were using very traditional academic programs and were not working with high risk students. They seemed to be “cherry picking” the students showing most promise and not those showing most need. I then got some idea of why I might have been chosen by the Office of Education to do the site visits.

The Office of Education also asked me to go to Washington, D.C. on some weekends to read and evaluate proposals. I chose to do those visits as well and found that things weren't going very well in the country at that time.

Late in the academic year and my final trip to Washington, D.C., over a hundred thousand protestors gathered in the city to protest the Cambodian Invasion and the earlier Kent State shootings of college students. Government buildings were heavily guarded by troops with tanks parked under camouflage between buildings. Helicopters flew constantly overhead and the threat of violence seemed everywhere.

I was able to complete my reading assignments by mid-afternoon and then decided to take my camera out into the protest areas and photograph what seemed to be a momentous event taking place before returning to Amherst. I took a full 36 exposure roll of Kodachrome film.

But I had to question the sincerity of many of the young people doing the protesting. For all too many, it seemed like just another spring break. There was a lot of frolicking and noise making that seemed to have little to do with Vietnam, Cambodia, or Kent State.

Naked males and females chasing one another around in pools seemed a little over the top to me and, unfortunately, reminded me of being shouted down by the Appalachian Volunteers at Union College. It also reminded me of the Council of Southern Mountains meetings at Fontana Village, North Carolina (1969), and Lake Junaluska (1970), where college students from many places with much energy but little else were slowly taking apart a long-standing institution while claiming to reform it. (The Lake Junaluska conference was only eight miles from my childhood home, and I stayed there while attending the conference.)

I returned to Amherst and the School of Education to be informed by Dr. Jordan that I was ready to take my comprehensive oral exams. The members of my committee had determined that my knowledge and experiences were substantial and that I was ready. I answered all questions in detail and passed with no objections from any of the five members.

I was advised to do two more independent studies related to Appalachian Studies upon my return to Berea and then move

forward with my dissertation. I agreed and with the approval of Dr. Jordan, I organized the two studies.

One was a study of my candidacy for a position on the five-member school board in the city of Berea. The other was to organize an Appalachian Studies Conference for the entire region.

Return to Berea

I returned to Berea exhilarated and exhausted but ready to guide the summer session of Upward Bound again. But first I went to see President Weatherford to recommend that he hire Loyal Jones to direct the new Appalachian Center. Loyal had just resigned from directing the Council of Southern Mountains after guiding it through several years of turmoil, but the problems that manifest themselves during the annual conferences at Fontana and Lake Junaluska were more than anyone should have to bear.

I told him that Loyal had an excellent background in administration and the arts and would make an excellent first director for the Center. I was quite happy with my work with Upward Bound and had just been contacted by the dean, William Jones, to teach a section of Issues and Values, a two-semester course for freshmen that would be divided into four parts.

One would be Appalachian Studies, one would be Black Studies, one would be Women's Studies and there would be an open

unit for students and professors to decide what they would like to study during that final half semester. The coordinator for Issues and Values course was Glen Stassen of the Philosophy and Religion Department.

I was especially interested in the Appalachian Studies unit since many of the writings chosen were from *Appalachians Speak Up*, a group of writings dating back to 1904 collected by Irmgard as an independent study as part of her Appalachian Studies major. (The writings were later published as a book by Berea College for use in its core curriculum and was used for several years in Issues and Values and in other general studies courses. I don't remember how many copies were printed, but many copies were also sold by the college book store to anyone wishing to buy a copy.)

Most of the essays were written by native Appalachians going back to Emma Bell Miles in 1904. She included one chapter of Miles' book, *Spirit Of The Mountains*, that later became must reading for all Appalachian scholars. It then was republished by the University of Tennessee Press.

I had written some position papers about including Appalachian Studies in Berea's new core curriculum which was developed in its entirety during my time at UMASS. (Perhaps I was more influential during my absence than when I was present.)

As I was completing my work at UMASS, we were also hiring the summer staff for Upward Bound and three of my fellow graduate students in the School of Education came to Berea to

be on our summer staff. We were undertaking a new interdisciplinary core curriculum composed of centers in aesthetics, communications, human relations and technology.

The Upward Bound program went smoothly that summer, and the new core curriculum proved popular with students and staff alike. Faculty were no longer burdened by the jargon of their disciplines and they were freed up to again become active learners just as we were trying to get the students to become.

In August I started planning in earnest to do my two independent studies. I planned to run for the Berea school board and run on issues alone and resolved not to engage in personnel attacks on my competitors. I would take careful notes on my campaign and then analyze the results, regardless of the outcome.

I then asked several college administrators, faculty, and local individuals to meet with me in starting the planning for an Appalachian Studies Conference as entailed in my other independent study. My advisor, Dr. Jordan, also flew down from UMASS to participate in the discussion.

The consensus was that the conference should be held at a more central location than Berea and several places were suggested. This would make it easier for many people throughout the region to attend since most would be attending at their own expense. It was also thought to be important to invite individuals other than academics as well.

I then contacted Helen Lewis, a sociology professor at Clinch Valley College in Virginia to see if she would assist with local arrangements and she agreed to do so. Ratha McGee, from a nearby educational cooperative, DILENOWSKI, agreed to assist.

At that time I was also teaching an introductory course in Appalachian Studies at Cumberland College in Williamsburg. The course was held for three hours one night per week and involved mostly older adults including many Cumberland College Faculty members including one in her seventies.

The local train station was going to donate a caboose to the college to house an Appalachian Center and many faculty members were interested in assisting. Some of the faculty members in the class were also interested in participating in the conference.

Community Action agencies, still funded in a diminished way by the War On Poverty, were contacted and some agreed to have staff members participate in panel discussions.

I also invited community organizers such as Zi Graves of Rockcastle County, Kentucky, and someone from Edith Easterling's Marrowbone Folk School in Pike County, Kentucky to participate in a panel discussion. Jim Branscome, a recent Berea graduate from Hillsville, Virginia, who was directing youth programs at the Appalachian Regional Commission agreed to participate on a panel as did Mary Kepecs of the National Education Association Council on Human Relations.

Ms. Kepecs took it upon herself to invite teachers from forty teachers' associations in the region to participate.

Newspapers throughout the region were sent a news release and many printed an invitation to the public at large. In other words, anyone remotely interested in Appalachian Studies was invited. It was felt by most of those helping organize the conference that this would be the first of several once yearly conferences to be involved in getting Appalachian Studies off to a running start.

I registered those in attendance and the count quickly added up to over a hundred people from several states and many institutions. The count didn't include several young people, probably thirty to forty mostly in their twenties and early thirties, who refused to register or even reveal their names or where they were from. Most adopted the mantra: "Our names aren't important; it's power to the people that counts." This they repeated over and over when asked to register.

After being shouted down by Appalachian Volunteers, being accused of sedition by two high school principals, and having negative editorials written about me, I probably should have sensed that some things were amiss. But I naively persisted, gave the opening address to set forth some goals, and welcomed all to what I hoped would be a fruitful conference.

The first panel discussions went well and people got to know one another between sessions. There was talk of starting journals, developing curriculum materials for use in high

schools and colleges, creating consortiums of colleges and universities, and starting an annual conference.

While those in attendance from the region were involved in discussions, those who refused to register stayed mostly by themselves, playing (poorly) what appeared to be brand new dulcimers, and singing protest songs. They were seen and heard but refused to become involved.

However, the second day was a different story. They had had enough of “these hillbillies organizing themselves” and decided to take direct action. They started chanting “Power to the people” and identifying participants from the region as “enemies of the people.”

Since I didn’t have a contingency plan to call the police to restore order, I met with some of those who had helped plan the conference. We agreed to cancel the remainder of the conference and go underground with some of the ideas and plans for action we were generally agreed upon.

But I was still in need of some closure as far as my independent study was concerned. I then met with three of the apparent leaders of the protestors who had clustered around me and they were more than happy to share their joy about stopping the conference in its tracks.

I first asked them to characterize themselves as a group since they were continuing to refuse to identify themselves as individuals. One of them immediately answered: “We are

refugees from affluence.” The other two nodded their heads vigorously in agreement. Others gathered around to see what might happen next.

Needless to say, that answer confirmed my suspicions and gave me an opening to ask more questions. My first question was for them to explain what they saw wrong with the activities they had witnessed but had refused to participate in.

They then explained, in some detail, that they felt that “natives” of the region were “not qualified” to organize themselves. Further, they said that they should be the ones doing the organizing in order for proper actions to take place. I didn’t ask questions about what such an organization might look like or what the roles “natives” might play. I left them congratulating one another and giving one another “high fives.” Then I left them basking in their contentment.

I did take the opportunity to personally thank many of the people I had met for the first time for their attendance and participation. I thanked Helen Lewis and others for helping make the space available and then returned to Berea a little wiser but not beaten down.

Dr. Jordan thought the independent study was a success and I was cleared to start the dissertation. Running for the school board was also a success, and I finished sixth of seven running. But I at least introduced some issues that were discussed and discovered that I wasn’t a politician.

Epilogue

From several sources I later discovered that many of the “Refugees From Affluence” had been kicked out of the Black Power movements when the African Americans decided their skills were no longer wanted or needed.

And at an Appalachian Studies Association conference at East Tennessee State University in 1980, I had a long conversation with my friend, Don West, one of the genuine Appalachian radicals. He said that he had been assisted by several such “Refugees From Affluence” when he was organizing coal miners in Harlan County, Kentucky in the 1930s.

Several years later when he could have used some assistance when organizing miners was met with stiff and bloody resistance by coal companies and their law enforcement friends, he contacted several at their homes. They then denied ever having known him! He concluded his comments with this statement that I will never forget: “They came south to sow their Appalachian wild oats and then went back home to go about their fathers’ businesses.” Sad but true.

After seven years of Appalachian Studies being largely an intense underground movement, it must be noted that in 1977 an Appalachian Studies conference was held at Berea College. That time it was organized by Dick Drake of Berea College, John Stephenson of the University of Kentucky, and Phil Conn of Morehead State University. Such conferences have been held yearly since that time, often drawing large numbers.

